

Planning to make a splash

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By Sandra Kallio
Feature writer

Step by step, slowly they climb, until 13 young people have formed a human double pyramid.

It's a stunt they wouldn't want to try for the first time when they're balanced on water-skis and moving 20 miles per hour. That's why the Capital City Water Ski Team began practicing in February on a dry surface under a high ceiling — at the Holiday Inn Southeast.

Contrary to rumors creeping around town, the club will be physically and financially ready for its usual season (Memorial Day to Labor Day) at Law Park, said Bill Berkan, chairman of the business and the skiers' boards of directors for Capital City.

"I don't know where (the rumors) came from, but Capital City is alive and well and is going to be around for at least another 23 years," Berkan said, adding that the club has been based at Law Park for the past 20 years.

"We are to water-skiing what the Green Bay Packers are to the National Football League. We're on our way back," Berkan said, adding, "We're going to come back a lot quicker than the Packers."

From 1975 to 1980, Capital City won national championships, but many of its top skiers turned professional or simply burned out and quit, so the club has been rebuilding since.

"I look for good shows this year and some tournament wins next year," Berkan said, adding that the club probably will take three to four years to develop a strong tournament program.

Financially, Capital City has improved its status from three years ago, when it was \$7,000 in debt. By the end of 1985, the club was \$2,000 ahead and 1987 looks much better, Berkan said. As reasons for optimism, he pointed out the sponsorship of Coors through Frank Beer Distributors of Middleton and the club's new sponsor, Skipper Bud's of Madison, which will provide a safety boat. Plus, he said, Capital City will sell supporting "sponsorship units" in return for certain promotions.

Given the cash from Coors and the efforts of the team and former members, Capital City has repaired equipment, rebuilt a dock and jumps, built another dock, improved the sound system and purchased new costumes.

Meanwhile, Mike Bloomquist, show director, has been working with 35 skiers, half of whom are in college. The oldest skier is 32 and the youngest is 7. Plus, the team has a canine member, a black Labrador-Great Dane mix that belongs to Jake Callaway, one of the performers.

"He has his own act," Callaway said. "He jumps off the dock and jumps on the (surf)board."

Bloomquist isn't looking for more skiing dogs, but he welcomes new two-legged members.

"Most people — when they come to the club — know how to two-ski forward and slalom, but people have come to the team not knowing anything, and we've taught them," Bloomquist said.

The team grew from 20 last year to 35, which meant the older members had to devote time they otherwise would have spent practicing their acts to teaching inexperienced skiers how to start from the dock.

As a result, the members didn't try as many difficult acts as they would have liked to, Berkan said, adding, "If you see us fall this year, it'll be because we're doing something extra special."

The double pyramid is one "extra special" act they're practicing dozens of times before they hit the water. It begins with a base of seven men, followed by four women taking turns climbing onto their shoulders and culminates with two lighter-weight women on the third tier.

As the top two pulled out flags they had tucked behind their backs, Berkan said, "Now remember, they're going 18 to 24 miles per hour."

When they're on the water, they'll remain in the double pyramid for at least five minutes, which isn't easy when the water is calm, much less when they're skiing over waves.

"They're making adjustments," Berkan said. "They have to have tremendous body control."

The bottom layer also has to be strong, and the top layer has to be light. That's one reason many of them train year-round, Bloomquist said: "The girls are all on diets, and the guys are all working on weights."

What goes up, must come down.

If the pyramid comes down in the wrong direction at the wrong time, someone could be seriously hurt.

"All it takes is for one of them to make a mistake, and the whole thing comes down," Berkan said. "One of the things we do is teach them how to fall."



Capital City Water Ski Team's double pyramid is performed by, from left to right, in the top row: Kris Kissinger and Laura Berkan; in the middle row: Lori Amera, Michelle Neilson, Kim Mistrretta

and Michelle Cutrano; and on the bottom, Scott Smith, Ty Engeseth, Jake Callaway, Jim Larson, Mike Amend, Stu Fleck and Ed Clark.

— State Journal photos by Joseph W. Jackson III

"Coming down is as difficult, if not more difficult, than going up," he said, explaining that the top two women are supposed to fall straight down because the pyramid is tilted back. The second layer has to hang on long enough to clear them before dropping.

The women on the team don't just stand there looking pretty during the show, which will be a variation on the "Back to the Future" theme the club presented last year.

Lori Amera, 20, a UW-Madison education student, admits that women do play some stereotypical roles.

"It's unfortunate, but that's OK because it's a show team," she said.

Although she said she can do every "girl's act," she added, "I've gone out there and barefooted with the guys."

"No one holds you back," she said. "It's an athletic team sport that's work, fun and you meet a lot of people. The biggest plus is the friends and good time. You're always rewarded."

She even has jumped in shows, one stunt that Jim Larson loves to do. A senior at UW-Madison, he has jumped 25 to 30 feet high and remained airborne for 100 feet. (The national record of 205 feet was set at the 1986 Coors Light Pro Water Ski Tour at Brittingham Park.)

— Bill Berkan,
Capital City skier



Ty Engeseth and Kris Kissinger practice act.